

Cracking apart

DRUG addiction is already perceived as the single biggest threat facing Britain. A survey of parents, published yesterday, puts drug abuse far ahead of all other risks threatening the future of their children: well ahead of Aids, pollution, mugging, drink, tobacco, unhealthy foods and accidents. But serious though the present drug problem has become, an even more serious threat looms on the horizon: crack. The Home Secretary, Mr Douglas Hurd, was right to concentrate on this new "spectre hanging over Europe" in his address yesterday to European ministers gathered in London to discuss international drug traffic controls.

Even before the arrival of crack, drug abuse has had devastating effects in the UK. As the Home Secretary noted: "The medieval plagues swept through Europe for reasons which no-one understood and no-one could do much about. This is a plague which we are visiting upon ourselves." Drug abuse has now become intertwined with Aids, with an increasing number of young people contracting the disease from dirty injecting equipment.

Crack, a cocaine-based narcotic, will make the situation even worse, as the United States has demonstrated. It is produced by **cooking cocaine hydrochloride with baking soda** and water. When the mixture **cools** it crystallizes and can be cut into squares or "rocks." It is consumed by heating the rocks and inhaling the vapour. The "rush" reaches the brain within seconds. Addiction is acquired much more quickly than with other drugs.

Worse still, there is no substitute drug which crack addicts can be offered in rehabilitation. This has made them more reluctant to seek help than opiate users like heroin addicts.

The drug has spread like a plague across the US, particularly through the poor inner cities. Mr Hurd was right to point to the danger facing Europe: "If crack ever becomes deeply rooted in Europe the outlook will indeed be bleak. Our job must be to work together urgently to ensure that the United States experience is not repeated here."

The war against the drug traffickers has to be waged on two fronts: reducing both the supply and the demand for drugs. Several small UK initiatives were announced yesterday: half-a-million pounds for the UN anti-drugs programme, a new project to help train custom officers from producer and transit countries beginning next April, and some £2 million to help improve the equipment of the law enforcement agencies in states along the supply route. Bilateral agreements are being forged to combat the international agencies ready to "launder" the traffickers' profits and make their confiscation easier; but a European convention would be even better.

There are always going to be limits on the success of controls over the supply. The rewards are so high, the loopholes so large that the product, which is not difficult to transport, will always find ways of reaching the market. Controlling the demand is less glamorous but even more important. The Government was late to recognise this but is now pushing forward on a range of fronts: media campaigns against Aids, school education programmes on drug abuse and an increase in funds for treatment and rehabilitation projects. There are still plenty of lessons which states could learn from each other about demand controls. Mr Hurd's idea of an international conference on the issue would be a useful next step.